DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 152 610 SO 010 520

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TITLE Tunnel Vision in Population Research: A Case in Point.
PUB DATE Apr 76
NOTE 18p.; For related documents, see SO 010 521-522; Not available in hard copy from EDRS due to poor reproducibility of original document; Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the Midwest Sociological Society (St. Louis, Missouri, April 21-24, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Analytical Criticism; Capitalism; Communism; *Demography; *Developing Nations; Economic Factors; Economic Research; Employment Patterns; Environmental Influences; Foreign Countries; Industrialization; Labor Conditions; Labor Economics; *Living Standards; *Overpopulation; Political Influences; *Poverty Research; Productivity; Social Planning; Textual Criticism; *Theories
IDENTIFIERS Marxism; *Mexico

ABSTRACT

This paper takes a critical look at a demographic study of Mexico, namely, Tad Fisher's "Mexico: The Problem of People". Fisher's study relies heavily on population growth as a poverty generating factor. The paper states that Fisher's study exhibited perceptual narrowness by not considering the Marxist interpretation that capitalist development necessarily results in displacement of labor rather than in rising living standards. The author maintains that Fisher's theory relating poverty to overpopulation is actually unwitting evidence against capitalist development in underdeveloped countries. Whereas Fisher viewed the paradox of high productivity and low employment as an enigma, this paper notes that the relationship becomes clear once private forms of investment are questioned. Namely, profit from privately owned farms accrues to the landowners who purchase additional farm machinery rather than hire additional workers. Much population research has been based on the Marxist view that overpopulation is only apparent and relative--that population does not increase too fast, but that it increases faster than the capitalist system can stand. The suggestion is that if Fisher had considered Marxian population research and population theories, his study would have contributed a more realistic interpretation of the relationship between exploitation, capital accumulation, and overpopulation. Other areas of concern with which Fisher failed to deal include consumption levels, economic growth rates, relative increments in per capita production, rates of accumulation of public capital, and public ownership of the means of production. The conclusion is that studies such as Fisher's tend to focus exclusively on the problem of human pauperization, but are insensitive to the growing impoverishment of natural habitats. (Author/DB)

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"TUNNEL VISION IN POPULATION RESEARCH: A CASE IN POINT"

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PRESENTED AT THE 40th ANNUAL
MEETING OF THE MIDWEST
SOCIOLOGICAL SOCIETY
ST.LOUIS, APRIL 21-24,
1976

SO 010 520

My use of the term "tunnel vision" is intended to focus attention on the fact that the assumptions we make, or take for granted, about the nature of the problems we study, tend to restrict our vision to a range of relevant data which is only as wide as the range of intellectual equipment upon which our assumptions are premised. If the range of that equipment is narrow, our focus of attention will be narrow; if it is broad, our focus of attention will be broad. Hence the tunnel effect bears a direct relation to the range and inclusiveness of the theoretical perspectives which sensitize our attention within a specific field of vision. The range and inclusiveness of the perspectives which sensitize our attention, in turn, tend to vary with the limitations which our institutions tend to impose on "normal science."

What I mean by "tunnel vision" differs from what we usually mean by a "blind spot" in that the former makes reference to a field or even fields of blindness which might be so extensive that our perception might more properly be said to suffer from a "sight spot" rather than from a "blind spot." Tunnel vision is systematic blindness which arises from systematic exclusion of whole bodies of theory from our cognitive equipment. "Blind spot" focuses on the narrowness of what is not seen. "Tunnel vision" focuses on the narrowness of what is seen. "Tunnel vision" has reference to the fact that insensitivity born out of theoretical and, or, practical narrowness and selectivity might keep in the dark data which may or may not carry greater weight in explaining the problem at issue (depending on the problem under consideration) than the data which our theoretical predilections allow us to see (Serrón 1974). Even when the intrinsic connectedness of the data forces us to catch a glimpse of information which points to a different explanation of the problem at hand, tunnel vision works in such a way that the theoretical implications of the data are not "seen" because of systemati blindness or lack of familiarity with relevant theories.

Population research is an interesting area in which to study "tunnel vision" for the simple reason that demographic phenomena lay close to our explanatory predilections when our research interests are oriented toward such poverty related problems as hunger, malnutrition, ignorance, illiteracy, ill health, inadequate medical care, inadequate housing, etc.

In this paper I propose to discuss briefly one of the most obvious instances of "tunnel vision" I came upon during the course of a study I completed recently, a study in which I examined Mexican poverty from both a Malthusian and a Marxian perspective.

Blase Bonpane once noted that what the United States is most in need of is to achieve an understanding of the Marxist view of population, adding that he found very little population paranoia in Marxist areas (Edwards and Bonpane 1970: 19). This statement, I think, needed to be made, and reaffirmed a conviction I had been raturing for a number of years; its truth was confirmed by my subsequent studies.

Before going into the specific case of "tunnel vision" I wish to consider, it might be helpful to sketch the Marx-Engels view of population in brief terms. Marx and Engels argued that population growth applies a pressure on the means of employment, not on the means of subsistence as Malthus claimed. The difference lay in that the means of production increase only when there is an increase in machine power and capital, while the means of subsistence increase whenever there is an increase of productive power, no matter how small. Means of production and means of employment are not the same thing in Marxian thought. In fact, the distinction between the two correspond to the distinction between the two main forms of capital. Total capital has two main components, fixed and variable capital. Fixed capital is the means of production and consists of plant, equipment,

machinery, etc. Variable capital is the means of employment and consists of the fluid portion of total capital which is used for the payment of labor.

Now, during the course of the development of the productive forces, the two components of capital do not advance at the same pace. In fact, with every increase in the technical sophistication of industry, in the scale of production, and in the diversification of tasks, the fixed component of capital tends to absorb an increasingly larger share of total capital. The need for fixed capital, which is actually accumulated labor, tends to increase at the expense of the need for variable capital, which is the fluid capital needed to pay for living labor.

Although in absolute terms the total amount of both forms of capital might increase, in relative terms the fixed component of capital grows in inverse ratio to the variable one. The ratio between the portion of total capital which takes a fixed form and the portion of total capital which takes a variable form, Marx calls the organic composition of capital. The organic composition of capital is an index of the productivity and efficiency of the productive forces. With every step in the development of the organic composition of capital the fixed and variable components behave as follows:

ORGANIC COMPOSITION OF CAPITAL	RATIO OF FIXED CAPITAL TO TOTAL CAPITAL	RATIO OF VARIABLE CAPITAL TO TOTAL CAPITAL
1/1	1/2	1/2
2/1	2/3	1/3
3/1	3/4	1/4
4/1	4/5	1/5
5/1	5/6	1/6
6/1	6/7	1/7
7/1	7/8	1/8
8/1	8/9	1/9

This indicates that as the portion of total capital taking a fixed form grows at the expense of the variable component. The total relative share of fixed capital widens as the other shrinks. This in turn means that the organic composition of capital increases, proportionately greater increases in investments will be needed to create jobs for the same size increments in the number of workers. It means also that fewer and fewer additional workers will be needed for successive equal increments of capital investments.

To Marx and Engels, overpopulation is only apparent and relative. The problem was not that population increased too fast. Rather, the problem was that population increased faster than the capitalist system could stand. Actually, when the worker was paid subsistence wages, they included enough for food, clothing and shelter, and for the reproduction of the next generation of workers.

Marx and Engels lived at a time when the Valley of the Mississippi and the Argentine Pampas were still largely uncultivated, and when the prodigious productive power of modern industry was just beginning to be felt. Overpopulation could not be the problem when people were starving in the midst of abundance. Too many workers could not be the problem when productive power was going idle and when there was no lack of work that needed to be done. The problem was that profit stood like a ghost between the need for food and the food available, between the means of production and the worker. Fundamentally, the problem was capitalist production as such, since, under its terms, capital and its expansion were the motive and end of production rather than the wellbeing of the producers themselves. Because of the strange logic of capitalist production the development of the productive power of labor did not work for the fulfillment and enrichment of the lives of the producers but to their degradation: to the creation of an industrial reserve army of the unemployed and the underemployed. Hence, because capital and

its expansion are the motive and end in production, what is an accumulation of productive power and increased productive efficiency on the one hand, appears (in capitalist terms) as overpopulation on the other (Meek 1971).

Such, in highly condensed and abbreviated terms is the Marxian view of "overpopulation." With these remarks in mind, we now return to the case of "funnel vision" we wish to consider. I have in mind an article published by the Population Reference Bureau, the author of which is Tadd Fisher. Interestingly enough it bears the title: "Mexico: The Problem of People." This article took a clearly neo-Malthusian perspective to the explanation of Mexico's poverty.*

Fisher took note of the fact that Mexico's galloping population growth is a relatively recent phenomenon. It had taken Mexico's population approximately three and a half centuries to return to its pre-conquest level of approximately 9 million inhabitants. Between 1870 and 1940 Mexico's population more than doubled, increasing from 9 to 19.8 million. By 1963 Mexico's population had increased to 38.4 million inhabitants (173-174).

What accounted for this acceleration? Fisher's answer was brief and devastating. It is summed up tersely and eloquently in the heading "DEATH TOOK A HOLIDAY." The unstated implications are clear: in the land of tequila, tamales, fiestas, sombreros and siestas even death refused to take life seriously; death too had taken to whistling mañana. Hence the accelerated rate of population growth is understandable. What Fisher discussed under this heading was the now familiar pattern of steady to slowly declining high birth rates coupled with sharply declining death rates; in sum, the phenomenon known as "the population explosion" (175-177).

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* All page references given henceforth will refer to the Fisher article, until further notice.

Fisher then noted that the interaction between sharply falling death rates and consistently high birth rates was an outmoded growth pattern. How was it outmoded? The crux of the argument here was that birth rates in the industrially developed nations (particularly in Europe and the U.S.) were less than half as high as those of Mexico in 1964. Their development had been fostered by the fact that within one or two generations of the introduction of effective death control, through modern medicine, there had followed a spontaneous decline in the birth rate. Also the modification of death rates in those countries took place much more gradually, and the more or less manageable balance which had followed shortly after made for populations which doubled very slowly by comparison to Mexico's population, thus encouraging technological and economic development. By contrast, Mexico's population growth rates, which rose from 1.7% per year to 3.1% per year in 25 years, coupled with certain geographic and climatic characteristics which were and are natural to Mexico, will set definite limits to the amount of improvement that can be expected from programs concerned with land and water utilization, food production, education and housing (177).

Fisher then noted that Mexico was rapidly approaching a situation when nearly half of the population was in the low production, high consumption age groups. Also, that Mexico's fertility potential rose as the large and increasing proportions of female children under 15 pass into the child-bearing ages, particularly into the prime childbearing age groups (178-179).

How large would Mexico's population be by 1980? Fisher noted that past predictions of Mexico's population growth have been consistently low, and then ventured the estimate that a predicted population of close to 70 million by 1980 would not be unreasonable.

Was Mexico's population growth a brake on progress? Fisher asked. His answer was that although progress and population had advanced together in Mexico during the previous thirty years, the likelihood was that a point was approaching when they would prove incompatible. Why? There was a race between production and reproduction and, despite great advances in the former (a trebled GNP between 1939 and 1964, and a trebling--which is questionable, to say the least**-- of per-capita real wages between 1929 and 1962), the latter, coupled with sharply decreased mortality, had yielded a rate of population growth high enough to outweigh the former. The reader is left to ponder in what sense the information cited in support of the preceding actually represented a consequence of excessive population growth. That information included allusions to the extremes between the haves and the have nots, to the large and poverty stricken rural sector (49%), to the high rates of illiteracy (38%), to the large percentage of the population whose diet contained no animal proteins (24%), to the presence of an unspecified number of people who lived on the margins of subsistence and whose numbers had remained at least constant, despite the changes, as well as other data (180 181).

Fisher then noted, citing John F. Kennedy, that those problems were not unique to Mexico, but typical to Latin America. The widespread hunger, the poor health, the lack of adequate housing, the unemployment, and the overall poverty of wide sectors of the Latin American population were presented as evidence. Fisher noted also that John Kennedy mentioned these facts when he proposed the program known as the Alliance for Progress, and that his proposal included a recognition that population was outpacing economic growth, but Fisher deplored the absence of just that recognition from the stated objectives of the Alliance for Progress. Instead

** Data from two other sources indicate that between 1940 and 1960 the index of productivity in Mexico's industries nearly doubled while the index of real wages declined by 10%. See: (Singer 1969:156) and (Revista 1963:349).

what he found was a misplaced emphasis on the desirability of achieving increasing life expectancy at birth and on the desirability of achieving a reduction of the mortality of children under five. The passage which follows is worth quoting in full (181-182):

> This lopsided committment, though well intentioned, is not as humanitarian as it appears. Whenever--in the above context--nations fail to acknowledge death and birth as equally important parts of the life process, they pay dearly for their ignorance. When the stork outraces the Grim Reaper--when population expands and resources and the equipment to utilize them remain limited--the consequences are devastating, as the present state of many nations testifies (emphasis mine).

Fisher concluded that, despite the commendable efforts made to relieve the plight of Mexico's poor, and despite aid from the Alliance for Progress, Mexico had a long way to go unless it gave thought to the size of its population. The question how far? was then dealt with by examining Mexico's demographic trends against Mexico's trouble spots and against Mexico's plans for improvement (182).

Mexico's plans for improvement are discussed under the heading "Liberal Plans: 'Reactionary' Geography." The point made here was that the economic policy of the Lopez Mateos administration had had three top priority goals: (1) to raise the standard of living of the population from the middle classes down, (2) to increase national income at a rate faster than population growth rates, and (3) to improve the pattern of income distribution (182).

Fisher then took note of the failure to fulfill previous economic goals of full employment, housing, health, and education for the population, and of what this record indicated about the likelihood that the Lopez Mateos policy goals would be achieved (182).

Next he spoke of Mexico as a country which is both beautiful and cruel to those who love it best. Despite its warmth to the visitor, Mexico was spoken of as a niggardly country in which to nurture the human body. Fisher cited with

approval a passage from Tannenbaum which says that Mexico is a beautiful place in which to live and a hard place in which to make a living (182-183).

Mexico's geography is said to be "reactionary" in that only eight percent of the country consented to remain level. The rest is extremely mountainous and bereft of passes which would facilitate communication and transportation. Isolation conditioned by this geography tends to perpetuate subsistence agriculture. The coastline is almost totally lacking in natural harbors, with the exception of Veracruz. Its rivers are turbulent, unnavigable, located in low population density areas and difficult to harness either for irrigation or for the generation of electric power. Rainfall drenches certain areas, covering the land with impenetrable jungles, while in others there is hardly ever a drop. And there is no lack of drought, earthquakes and other natural calamities (182-183).

The section titled "Industry's Late Start" is an example of both terse analysis and of socially circumscribed limitations on perception. Here Fisher noted that Mexico had come face to face with an enigma which troubles many nations. The enigma took the form of a trend which became increasingly more accentuated as modern industry developed: high productivity tended to be accompanied by low employment, and the introduction of automated methods of production had vastly compounded the problem. Detailed figures were given on how much capital was needed to make one job available: 50 to 100 thousand dollars in the U.S., up to 20,000 in Puerto Rico. A modest estimate of what Mexico needed to make one job available was $10,000. The yearly contingent of new job seekers was estimated at 390,000. This was taken to mean that about $4 billion would have to be invested each year to create enough new jobs. An example was given of a new plant (Poli Rey) which was to produce polyethylene in Reynosa. With a total investment of 8 million it only opened up 200 new jobs, a rate of over $40,000 per job.

Detailed figures were given to show that increased productivity in steel and cotton textile production were accompanied by less than proportionate increases in employment in the former and by actual decreases in employment in the latter (195).

> In the iron and steel industry employment rose from 10,804 to 19,874 during the 1950's--an 84 percent increase. But the value of production rose from $33.6 million to $328 million--876 percent. In cotton textiles, employment dropped 29 percent, but the value of production increased 77 percent.

A minute analysis was presented of how labor was displaced by productivity increases with the introduction of every new element of production. This was done by citing from the work of A.J. Jaffe (196):

> As labor utilization improves, national income grows. The workers in a new textile factory produce far more cloth than the one using a hand loom. A motor truck transports more goods and transports them more quickly than an animal drawn vehicle. And so it goes . . . there can be substantial increases in national income without any change in the over all level of employment. In fact, national income can double or treble without an increase in the volume of total employment, because the rate of increase in national income is closely related to the rate of increase in labor productivity, while the rate of increase in total employment depends primarily on the size of the labor reservoir.

Facts were presented on what happened to Mexico's new labor force contingent in 1950. There were 300,000 new people looking for work and only 58,000 were absorbed by manufacturing.

What then is keeping Mexico from making rapid progress toward industrializatio One of the serious impediments in the way of her becoming industrialized was that her transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy began late by comparison to the now industrialized nations. How was this tardiness an impediment? For one thing these nations now had a large internal and external market, they had plenty of capital resources, a skilled labor force, and well organized avenues of distribution. Moreover, these nations were now undergoing their Second Industrial Revolution--a revolution based on highly refined technology which

began with the end of World War II. Now the problem was that if Mexico wished to industrialize it faced a many sided challenge: (1) create and expand its industry, (2) produce as efficiently as competing nations do, and (3)--as if the problem wasn't difficult enough already--Mexico must also make social progress (194).

But what does "social progress" mean? Fisher clarified the meaning of "social progress" through reference to Mr. Tannenbaum's work. Tannenbaum denied that any nation in the past has been able to provide "a foundation for rapid capital accumulation and to maintain social security and economic equity at the same time (195). Tannenbaum is also given as the source of the view that these "two objectives may . . . prove incompatible" (195). Final clarification of the meaning of "social progress" comes out in the following passage (195):

> Industrialism in the United States and Great Britain proceeded with little awareness of the social and human implications of industrial labor. There was little concern about long hours, low wages, or the incidence of unemployment, accident and death. The needs of social equity were attended to long after these economies had laid the foundations of a basic capital equipment, which made possible the rapid growth of manufacturing and assured an increase in production at a cost low enough to make available a continuous and growing surplus beyond immediate requirements . . . contemporary labor policy developed after capital accumulation made the surplus possible (Emphasis mine).

The implication therefore is clear. Mexico was attempting to reconcile two apparently incompatible objectives, namely how to increase the rate of capital accumulation as well as productive efficiency, while reducing the length of the working day, increasing wages, reducing unemployment, reducing accident rates, and reducing death rates.

As regards the reduction of unemployment the problem became especially difficult at a time when automation had less and less need for the unskilled and more and more need for skilled labor and when "one skilled technician in an automated plant . . . handles a volume of work done by a number of men yesterday (195).

What then were the choices faced by Mexico? Here Gonzalez Casanova is quoted as saying that Mexican industries were working at 50 percent capacity and (in some cases) at 20 percent, and that Mexico had to choose between either increasing production, or lowering the birth rate. Since he considered the second alternative unlikely, and perhaps even undesirable, and since he believed Mexico had more than enough men and more than enough capital, he regarded the former of the two choices as being the more likely to be opted for (195-196).

Gonzalez Casanova's position is then criticized: (1) Mexico's manpower had to be trained and employed effectively before production would be increased, (2) wage levels had to be high enough to keep the economy moving, and (3) Mexico's leaders constantly stressed the urgent need for capital accumulation (196).

Since the labor force in 1980 was projected to become twice as large as it had been in 1960, if underemployment and poverty were not to increase and widen due to the need to stretch out the work available in agriculture and services, Fisher suggested that "capital must continue to grow so that industry could expand and modernize" (196); also that jobs and wages in industry had to increase at a faster pace. Jaffe is then quoted as saying that "the rate of increase in total employment depends primarily on the size of the labor reservoir"(196). Following this statement, Fisher says that Mexican "agriculture has had a labor surplus for years" (196), and that the seasonal flow of braceros has not solved the problem. This is followed by a couple of value judgments, one of which is clearly personal, while the other is made vicariously (196):

> Wisely, Mexico has steadily diversified its industries to meet both domestic needs and those of potential foreign markets. Not so wisely, in the opinion of many, the Mexican government has nationalized major industries and has invested heavily in others . . .

Now, all of the facts given to substantiate what Fisher refers to as the "enig of high productivity and low employment--except for the fact that no figures are given for variable capital--might have been used by Marx to illustrate his thesis (Marx 1902:708):

> . . . The fact that the means of production, and the productiveness of labor, increase more rapidly than the productive population, expresses itself, therefore, capitalistically in the inverse form that the labouring population always increases more rapidly than the conditions under which capital can employ this increase for its own self-expansion.

In fact, Fisher came close to stating the Marxian view, but, to him, the contrast between the movement of the industrial process and the rate at which new jobs are being opened became a matter of poor fortune (197):

> . . . Unfortunately, the industrial process is moving ahead more swiftly and successfully than are attempts to make a place for the Mexican peasant in the consumer economy and to train him to be an effective producer as well.

Why then was the inverse relation between productivity and employment seen as an enigma? One would expect that after he had come upon the facts illustrating this relationship, after he had seen especially that in the cotton textile industry a much reduced labor force had been able to produce heavy increases in production, a question would have logically arisen as to the relationship between exploitation, capital accumulation, and the formation of a redundant population. Why was this question not considered? Could this omission perhaps have anything to do with the fact that in the expected order of things, from the author's point of view, resources and equipment utilize population rather than the reverse?

This much was suggested by the statement Fisher made to the effect that many people thought it unwise for the Mexican government to nationalize industries. Is there a possibility that a different way of looking at the matter, if such a view carried authority, might produce sufficient public funds for "effective" education of the population, or for the purpose of maintaining a level of consumption which might be compatible with such economic growth rates as are deemed satisfactory and desirable to provide for the total population? What is happening to the relative increments in <u>per capita</u> production? What rate of accumulation of truly public capital would be possible under a system of public ownership of the means of production? What rates of investments would be possible under such

a system? What growth rates would follow from them? How would these developments affect the unemployment picture? Indeed, the very conception of employment? Under what kind of leadership would these changes be possible?

Questions such as these were not dealt with; they appeared to fall outside of the field of vision of the article, and this is precisely what we mean by "funnel vision" in population research. When Fisher did touch upon the problems of education, he did so from the point of view of scarcity assumptions. Why education had to be a scarce resource was not probed into beyond asserting (quite correctly as far as it went) the need to emphasize the need for a fourth "R" in education: reproduction. The question of why consumption levels were not sufficiently high to keep the economy moving was not probed into, beyond a mere recognition of wide income inequality. How did it happen that there was an apparent incompatibility between rapid capital accumulation on the one hand and the security economic equity and well being of the producers of capital? The evidence that employment levels are inversely related to the accumulation of capital was not followed out; instead the view that the rate of increase in total employment depends "primarily on the size of the labor reservoir" was presented alongside in the form of an unsupported assumption. Of course, it seems obvious enough that "the rate of increase in national income is closely related to the rate of increase of labor productivity"; the question remains, however, as to just how "national" the national income is, and how closely such income is related to labor productivity (Fisher 1964:197, 182 and 196).

The present writer wishes to suggest that much if not most of what goes under the heading of population or demographic research suffers from "funnel vision" in the sense that most of it, consciously or unconsciously, is premised on scarcity assumptions about poverty and about overpopulation. The study we have just considered is a case in point. We can not objectively go on taking it for granted that the assumptions we find institutionalized in the existing system provide the

outer boundaries beyond which our questions can not go. I mean assumptions about the conditions under which populations are useful, about the rights of property, about the protection of investments, whether foreign or domestic, about the proper relations of productivity to profits, about the incompatibility between capital accumulation on the one hand and social security and economic equity on the other. I want to suggest that there is a very simple way to resolve the apparent enigma which the inverse relation between productivity and employment seems to pose. We need to become familiar with a theory which has tended to be anathema to our customary forms of thought and to the usual channels of "normal science:" thd Marxian theory of relative surplus population and of the exploitative sources of poverty.

However, I wish to suggest also that there is a type of funnel vision that arises not from theoretical narrowness but from a vacuum of theory. The life supporting capacity of what Commoner has called the biosphere (Commoner 1971) of this planet may not be able to withstand a complete unfolding of the contradictions built into the capitalist system of production. I want to suggest that while our eyes are focused either on population growth, or on capitalist exploitation of labor, the ravages inflicted by both of these on the natural habitat tend to be taken for granted. Our concern with human pauperization, though real, suffers from the limitations of an anthropocentric illusion: we lack a realistic sense of the self-destructive, ultimate consequences of the relentless, accelerating and in some cases irreversible impoverishment of the natural habitat. We can not afford to wait for the final crisis of world capitalism in the hope that it will bring an end to the old system, because there might be little or nothing left to build a new system on. We need to find a way, theoretical and practical, to change the existing order of things without taking a chance on a final ecological collapse. Otherwise we shall have paid the ultimate price for our selective vision unselective human self destruction.

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